



Contributed photo

Misty Bannow of Dowagiac paints a car at a body shop. The high school senior gained a state award for advancing in a career area dominated by men – auto repair and body work.

Breaking traditions and pounding out dents

Dowagiac girl gets state award for automotive career

By **DEBRA HAIGHT**
HP Correspondent

DOWAGIAC — Dowagiac Union High School senior Misty Bannow likes the idea of being a trailblazer, pursuing a career in a male-dominated trade.

But mainly she just likes working on cars.

Misty has a two-hour auto mechanics class first thing each morning at the

high school, then takes a couple of academic classes before spending the afternoon either at the Van Buren County Technical Center or a body shop in Dowagiac. If that wasn't enough, she works at an



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ice cream shop.

Last week, she was one of 21 young people – and the only one from Southwest Michigan – to win a Breaking Traditions award from the Michigan Department of Education. The awards went to college and high school students, mostly girls, who have found success in nontraditional career and technical education programs.

"I really don't know," she said when asked if she thinks of herself as a pioneer or trailblazer. "I'm happy to get the award. It helps me get to the point where I can show people that it's not just a man's job. ... It was a surprise to get the award. I really wasn't expecting it. I just do what I love."

See **AUTOMOTIVE**, page B2

AUTOMOTIVE

From page B1

"A lot of men think girls and women can't do it, that it's a dirty job and that women can't use the tools. Auto body work is dirty with dust and chemicals, but girls are more detailed oriented and that's important with auto body work. ... It's also artistic. I like the artistic side and doing airbrush paint work is art-work."

She's been taking auto mechanic classes at the high school all four years and auto body classes at Van Buren for two years. She's airbrushed a custom golf cart and bikes.

Last year she helped restore a Tiburon GT that had been totaled.

She got the chance earlier this year to perform co-op work at Bonomo's Collision Center in Dowagiac.

Her interest in cars started early when she was watching her dad race cars and motorcycles in the salt beds of Arizona. He also restores motorcycles.

"He does land speed racing, and I've always loved cars and trucks," she said. "I grew up watching him race and have raced with him."

She said it surprised her family when she decided to take auto shop classes because she had always been more interested in horses.

"Now my family comes to me to fix their cars," she said. "In class, at first the boys said I didn't belong but then they kind of adapted to me being here. Now they come to me if they have questions."

She is a veteran at showing horses at the Cass County Fair, doing barrel racing and giving riding lessons.

Her plans include taking classes at Southwestern Michigan College, starting in the fall and continuing to work at Bonomo's. She's already nationally certified in painting and refinishing and wants to get certification in brakes, engines and suspension.

"I like both (mechanical and body), and I'm going to do both and see where it takes me," she said.

Her eventual goal is to move to Arizona, where her father lives, and get into the "high performance" side of things.

"I want to learn how things work so I can make them go faster," she said. "For me, this is a stepping stone."